

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF LUNCHES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

With a Discussion of the Elements of Cost in School
Lunch Expenses

BY

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"The story of the beginning of lunches in the High Schools of Boston is the story of the beginning of the school lunch movement in America." In 1894 the Boston School Committee passed an order to the effect "that only such food as was approved" by them "should be sold in the city school houses." The order was the result of an agitation begun under the leadership of Mrs. Ellen H. Richards, whose interest had been aroused by a realization of the educational value that lay in placing properly prepared food before young people. She was also keen to see the menace to health that lay in the "goodies" the children were purchasing at recess from the corner stores, and in some cases from the lunch counters installed by janitors in the school buildings. After the passage of the above-mentioned order, the New England Kitchen, then in the early days of its food experiments, was asked to provide the food for the school luncheons. The original menus were carefully worked out under the supervision of Mrs. Richards, and the whole scheme was not only excellently planned from the point of view of scientific nutrition, and of social service, but it was also on a good business basis. All the food was manufactured at the Central Kitchen and distributed to the serving centers at the schools. Here the city provided the space for serving, the stationary equipment, and the fuel for reheating. This is practically the organization that exists to-day, nearly 20 years after, except that the work is under the management of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, and the general supervision is in the hands of an advisory committee composed of three representatives from the Union and three High School Head Masters, elected annually by the Association of Head Masters of the Boston High and Latin Schools. The business has doubled in the past seven years, and luncheons are now being served to upwards of 5,000 children at 16 different High Schools. The deficit in the smaller schools is made up by the profit in the larger ones, so that all get the same service. During the past winter the management of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, realizing that the next point in progress must be along educational lines, and feeling

that to accomplish this the School Committee itself must be responsible for the lunch work, has endeavored to turn over its stewardship to that body. This change has not yet been accomplished, but we hope for it soon as the next point in the development of the High School Lunch System of Boston.

In the meanwhile the development of luncheons in High Schools all over the country has been rapid and noteworthy. From tables in dark basements where janitors dispensed candy and stale cake we have advanced to huge light airy lunch rooms on the top floors of new buildings with all that is modern and up-to-date in equipment, and with a menu varied and tempting. This is especially true of the newer High School buildings of the West. Back in the East we are still struggling with the dark, congested lunch room in the basements of old outgrown buildings.

An investigation during the winter of 1910-11 in the State of Massachusetts showed that in 67 cities and towns lunch was served in High Schools. Ten of these lunch rooms were under the direct control of the school authorities, forty-three were money making enterprises, six were managed by women's clubs, one by a church society, five by the students themselves, and two by the Domestic Science Department of the school. In schools where the lunch rooms are run for the profit of the managers little or no attention is paid to the laws of hygiene and nutrition. The young people are provided with the food which they are most likely to buy—sweets and pastry. In lunch rooms run as social service enterprises by women's clubs, definite effort is made to provide nourishing food at a low price, and usually high food standards are maintained. This is true also of lunch rooms under school control, and in addition in these schools some connection is occasionally made with the school curriculum.

Another investigation during the past winter has shown that in sixteen of the larger cities of this country the lunch work has been placed under the control of school authorities after various experiences with outside management. This investigation also revealed the fact that there is a general tendency toward centralization—the management of the several lunch rooms of a city by one director, the natural and most frequent method of organization being under the Domestic Science Department. The benefits resulting from school control are obvious. So far very little advantage has been taken of the educational opportunities latent in lunch work. Yet there is a growing feeling everywhere that the lunch room plants may be used in connection with the courses in chemistry, hygiene, domestic science, decorative art, social training, business methods, etc. To come to a full utilization of these educational possibilities course teachers and school boards must have full responsibility for the lunch work.

The financial status of school lunch rooms has been the object of much attention with us, and we have been requested to devote a considerable portion of our discussion to this phase of the subject. We have found in our investigations that almost never are two school lunch rooms on the same financial basis. The term "covering all expenses" requires careful definition, and for the purposes of this paper I shall take the phrase in its literal meaning. To cover all expenses means to pay not only for food and service but for superintendence, equipment, fuel, heat, rent, light, water rates—in brief *all* the expenses which a commercial lunch room must meet. It is obvious that if a school restaurant had to meet all these charges the prices would be prohibitive—especially in small schools where the overhead charge per capita would be very high. Since the School Board requires the attendance of the child at an hour when he is in need of food, that Board should make it possible for him to buy that food cheaply by providing a comfortable room in which he is to eat it, free of rent, and at least simple equipment for preparing it. Some school boards go much further. It is in this matter of subsidy from the Board that school lunch rooms vary so greatly. In our investigation of last winter we found no High School lunch could properly be said to be "paying all expenses." The centralized lunch system of Boston comes nearest to this status of any, because the School Board there provides no place for the cooking of the food. The rent, heat, light, fuel, etc., at the central kitchen are paid for out of the receipts from the luncheons. These overhead charges in Boston during the winter of 1911 and 1912 amounted to upwards of \$4,000. That the system can carry such large additional costs, and still maintain prices as low as other High School lunch rooms not so burdened is undoubtedly due to the saving in food costs and supervision that accrue under a centralized system of cooking. It is also somewhat due to the use of the less expensive forms of food, which affect not the wholesomeness and nutritive value of the lunches, but possibly to some extent their variety and attractiveness. At the other extreme as regards subsidy from the School Board was a school restaurant where the receipts were required to cover only the cost of the raw material. All other expenses were met by school funds. The majority of school lunch rooms, however, were in a class between these two extremes—almost no two being exactly alike. Some pay for their own fuel, more do not. Some pay superintendent's salary, others do not, and so it goes. In many there is practically no book-keeping at all, and it is impossible to discover their actual financial status. As a general rule, the lunch rooms in small schools where the patronage is small, receive the most help in the way of subsidy from the Board. In a city where there are both large and small High Schools and a centralized management, the profits of the large schools

pay the deficit in the small ones, and all get equal service. In cities, however, where there is no centralized system, the large schools are very apt to be exploited by business firms who draw considerable profit from the enterprise, while the small schools suffer from high prices and poor food.

A study of the elements of cost in our own system, and a comparison with these same elements in other systems has been very suggestive to us. First we compared the Boston financial statement with that of Bradford, England—the only other school lunch system having a central kitchen like ours which we have personally investigated. We found that the food in both Boston and Bradford amounted to 54% of the total expense. The delivery in Boston was 4% of the total, in Bradford 17%; the wide difference being due to the fact that in Boston there are only 16 serving centers, in Bradford 25; also, in Bradford the dishes are carried back and forth each day, the cleansing of them being done at the central plant. The labor item, however, is much higher in Boston, being 32%, while in Bradford it is 18%. This is partly due to the higher wages paid generally in this country. It is also much more economical of labor to concentrate all the heavy work of dish washing at one point and to do it with up-to-date apparatus. However, it is significant that the labor and delivery together in each city amount to 36% of the total expense, showing that there would be apparently nothing to be gained in Boston if we adopted Bradford's method of sending the dishes to the central plant each day, the extra delivery costing as much as the saving in labor. We have grouped all other expenses under the head of "general;" in Boston they amount to 9% of the total, in Bradford 9½%. The similarity of all these costs made us feel in Boston that we had a system *equal* at least in economy of administration to that of Bradford which had been held up to us as a model. Our next comparison was with the High School lunch system of St. Louis. We found that food costs there were 67% of receipts, and during the same time 53% with us. After studying the situation in the two cities we realized the reason for this divergence. In St. Louis most of the bread stuffs are purchased as well as the ice cream, so that the cost price includes the labor and the manufacturer's profit. In Boston all the bread and rolls are manufactured at the central kitchen, and there the cost price represents only the value of the raw material, the cost of the labor on these goods showing up in our labor item which is 3% more than in St. Louis, no manufacturer's profit being included at all because we do our own baking. Another reason for the higher labor cost in Boston, it being 32% there and only 29% in St. Louis, is the division of the business into 16 centers where \$5,000 less was received than in the six centers of St. Louis. Of course a system where the sales

amounted to \$57,000 at six centers would be more economical of labor than one where the sales amounted to \$52,000 at 16 centers. This comparison is interesting because it is of two systems receiving very different amounts of subsidy from their respective school boards. Boston could not afford to bring its food costs up to 67%, because it has \$4,000 of overhead charges to meet, items of expense which do not appear at all in the St. Louis budget, being borne indirectly by the Board itself. (There the Board provides kitchen space in the schools free of rent, heat, light and fuel charges, thus relieving the school lunch system of the expense of a central plant.)

Another comparison of value to us in Boston is that of our own annual statements year by year. We have found, as would naturally be expected, the food costs steadily rising from 49% in 1907 to 54% in 1912—a difference which would have necessitated the raising of prices if it had not been for the fact that along with this increase came a corresponding increase in the volume of business, almost doubling in six years. This lowered our service cost per capita and made it possible to maintain our old prices for food which was costing us much more.

These points which I have tried to make merely go to show that as regards the business side of the High School lunch room problem, it is like any other business—centralization goes for economy of administration, and the higher the costs the more must be received for the product unless sales increase in proportion.

In conclusion I want to point out again that it is with the School Board itself that the responsibility for the school lunch work must ultimately rest; in many cities the Boards have shouldered this responsibility, in others they are planning to do so, and I wish to lay before this meeting the discussion of the question which we have found settled so variously in the different cities of this country. Should the school lunch restaurant pay all expenses, including charges for rent, heat, light, etc., or is it legitimate that the School Board should lower the price to the students by taking upon itself some of the financial burden? In the latter case to what extent should the school lunch be subsidized? Is it possible to set a standard?

